

After El by rileyhart

Series: [What is Love? A definition by Mike and El. \[3\]](#)

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Summary:

Mike's grief for the loss of his first love - Eleven.

After El

Mike is screaming. He can feel his face wet with tears.

“EL! EL!”

“Mike,” it’s Lucas, “Mike, she... she saved us.” He touches Mike’s arm. “She’s gone.”

Mike shakes him off. “No,” he mutters, shaking his head, “she’s not gone. She’s here. We just have to look.”

Lucas and Dustin exchange a look; they both have tears in their eyes too.

Mike glares at them. “You guys don’t even care she’s gone!” He yells.

“That’s not fair, Mike,” Dustin says, his voice breaking, “she was our friend too.”

“If Will is alive, then she can be too,” Mike says with a sob, “she has to be.”

He runs at of the room, because *if she’s not in here than she has to be somewhere else*. She has to be. And he has to get her before *they* do.

Lucas attempts run after him, but Dustin grabs his arm. “Let him go.”

Dustin thinks about the last time he said that. It had been to Mike at the scrap yard, Lucas had been the one walking away then, and Eleven had disappeared. He thinks about the last time Mike had left. They’d been at the quarry, Mike had yelled at Eleven, and ridden away. He remembers walking Eleven back to Mike’s with Lucas. She’d cried the whole way.

Adults soon come. Ambulances, police. They remove the bloody bodies of the bad men that Eleven killed. They wrap the three boys up in blankets. They tell them that everything is going to be okay.

They don’t find Eleven.

Mike wants to yell and scream at them. Everything will not be okay. Not until they find Will and Eleven.

Dustin's parents come, and then Lucas's, and then finally Mike's.

His mom hugs him tightly. He knows she's speaking, but what she is saying he can't make out. Everything seems so strange and blurry.

But it all comes back into focus when she says one name. *Will*.

Mike's head shoots up. "What did you just say?"

"They found Will, Mike! They found him!" She sobs.

And for the first time, Mike forgets about Eleven. He rushes over to Dustin and Lucas. "They found him! They found Will!"

The boys all let out a howl of pleasure, sadness forgotten, as they grab each other and jump up and down.

Then Mike remembers Eleven, and he feels a pain in his gut that will soon become so familiar.

How could he forget?

Karen and Ted take the boys to the hospital, and they're met there by Jonathan, Nancy, and weirdly enough, Steve.

Nancy hugs Mike. "Where's Eleven?" She asks him.

Mike grits his teeth and shakes his head. He walks away from Nancy and slumps down in a chair, trying not to cry.

She looks at Dustin and Lucas for explanation. "She killed the monster." Dustin tells her quietly.

"She saved us." Lucas adds.

"What happened to her?" Nancy asks, already dreading the answer.

Lucas can feel a lump rising his throat. "She just disappeared with it.

It took her with it.”

He sits down next to Mike, and Dustin next to him.

They all wait for a very long time. Dustin and Lucas fall asleep. But Mike can't, despite never having been more tired in his life.

All he can think about is Will and El, and if maybe they hadn't been so obsessed with finding Will, El might still be alive. If they had just kept her safe, if *he* had. She'd trusted him. He'd promised her.

I promise.

Promise?

It means something you can't break.

He feels that pain in his gut again, like he is going to cry and throw up at the same time.

He'd lied. He'd broken the promise.

And he hates himself, because in his mind he finds himself bargaining them. Who would he rather have, Will or El?

Both. He wants both of them. Why does he only get one. *Why?*

At this point he can feel new tears coming, thick and fast; warm against his clammy cheeks.

Less than two hours later, Jonathan comes out into the waiting room and Mike shakes the boys awake.

In a blur, they rush to Will, hugging him, and telling him everything that has happened.

And for the first time Mike doesn't feel angry or sad when thinking about Eleven since she's been gone, but a strange mixture of happiness and sadness at the same time, as he, Lucas, and Dustin recount their tales to Will.

But Will coughs, and they all stop and look at him with worry. It

hadn't occurred to any of them about what would actually happen to Will afterwards. They'd just assumed it was going to go back to normal, and they were suddenly realising that it wasn't.

That first night after everything, everyone hugs him and asks him he's okay.

"Do you need to talk?" Ted, Nancy, and Karen all ask within five minutes of each other.

He shakes his head. "No, I'm just going to have a shower, and go to bed."

He cries in the shower, it's the first time, but not the last. He tries to wash away the anger and sadness and grief for Eleven, as well as the happiness and relief for Will. He hates having these strange conflicting emotions. He hates feeling happy even though El is gone, and he hates feeling sad even though Will is back. He scrubs himself raw before he gets out. But he doesn't feel any better.

He wanders down to the basement and sees El's blanket fort half dismantled, he feels the pang in his gut, as he rushes over and quickly fixes it up. He looks at her empty fort, and feels his chest give as he begins to sob.

She can't be gone.

She can't.

The next few days pass like a dream, hazy and quick. The boys visit Will in the hospital everyday. Sometimes they bring boardgames, sometimes they talk, and other times they just sit.

The town is all abuzz about Will's miraculous return, and the boys are requested to do an interview with the local newspaper, and then even for a national one. They turn down both though, of course ("My son's emotional trauma is not for sale," as Karen puts it).

The hazy days turn into weeks, and soon Will is out of the hospital, and another week later he's back at school. The kids either treat him like he's some kind of strange alien (not that they didn't use to do that), or come rushing up to him and ask what it was like to be dead. Will just shrugs and tells them what he tells everyone. "I don't remember anything. I just fell asleep and then I woke up."

Some just look at their friends, amazed; others follow it up with questions like, "Does that mean you'll never be able to die?"

Will just laughs and shrugs. "Who knows,"

And together the boys walk away.

He looks for her in everything over those first few months. Eggos, the number '11', blonde hair, pink dresses, people with short hair like hers, blood noses, his grey sweat pants and blue jumper, the frozen food aisle at the supermarket with the Eggos, whenever a door shuts suddenly, or when there's a gust of wind. All of these things are explicitly linked to her, and he can't think about them without and thinking about her, and he hates that it hurts.

Eggos don't taste as good anymore, but he eats them anyway. He *has* too, because *she* can't, and that's not fair. And when he can't stomach them, he takes them down to the basement on a plate and places them in El's fort. "For when you come back," he says to the empty basement.

He sits in it—her fort—sometimes; he pulls his knees up to his chest and shuts his eyes and wills her to return, to walk down the stairs in her pink dress with a bloody nose, for her to sit next to him and rest her head on his shoulder like she did when they were in the gym. But when he opens his eyes, he's alone, and he let's out a shuddering breath and leaves the basement.

Just under a month after Will's return, he is doing this again, and wiping his eyes, he walks up the stairs slowly, like he's done many times before, but this time he hears his parents hushed voices in the living room.

"I think he needs to talk to someone, Ted," Karen says, "he's struggling,"

"He can talk to us," Ted responds.

"I mean to a professional Ted, like a physiologist or something,"

"I though he was seeing the school guidance counsellor,"

"He stopped going, said he didn't need it and that the counsellor wouldn't listen,"

"Well, if he was telling his monster stories again..."

"We need to do something, Ted! He's always upset, and he keeps hoarding waffles in that fort in the basement!"

Mike stomps up the stairs loudly, and pushes the door open aggressively. He walks dramatically past the living and glares at his parents. "I don't need to talk!" He yells at them.

He runs up the stairs and slams his door, locking it behind him.

When the Snow Ball is first mentioned at school the girls in the class all start whispering to each other and giggling; Mike sinks in his chair and feels the now familiar pain in his gut. The teacher continues to talk about the Snow Ball, and Mike can feel, to his uttermost embarrassment, tears in his eyes. He tries to hide his face as a tear splashes into his desk. The only thing worse than crying in front of the class is peeing your pants, but that memory just makes him feel even worse.

Lucas, who's sitting at the desk next to him, leans over and gives him a light whack. "Mike, are you okay?"

Mike sniffs quietly and nods his head, not looking at him.

Mike wipes his eyes, and holds his tears back, as he raises his hand and asks the teacher to go to the bathroom, keeping his head down.

He rushes to the bathroom, thankfully no one is in there; locks himself in a stall and cries. He regains control of his emotions a few minutes later; swallowing down the last of the tears. He washes and dries his face before going back to class.

“Are you okay, Mike?” Lucas asks again, once Mike has sat down.

Mike nods, looking at him this time. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

Lucas doesn’t look as if he believes him, but he doesn’t press the issue, instead he shares a not-so subtle glance with the other three.

The night of the Snow Ball comes, and Mike can’t help himself, he puts on the suit he wore to Will’s funeral—it’s his only one—and messily ties the tie himself. He slips into the kitchen and takes an unopened box of Eggos from the freezer without being noticed. He uses some of Holly’s ribbon to tie a bow around the box.

He goes down to the basement and sits in her fort, the cold Eggos in his hand.

If she’s going to come back, she’ll come back today. We promised.

He waits for over an hour, his heart heavy like no twelve year old’s heart should ever be.

A tear falls onto the no-longer-cold box of Eggos, and then another, and another.

She’s gone, she’s gone, each tear says.

She’s gone. She’s gone. She’s gone. She’s gone.

“She’s really gone.” He says to the empty basement, and it’s as if a weight as been lifted off his chest, as if not admitting to her death had been crushing him in a way that accepting it never could.

His tears come faster and faster until he has completely soaked the box of Eggos and the corners are starting to tear, until finally they stop, and he breathes again, and it’s like he’s been holding his breath waiting for her to come home, and now he knows, he *knows*, that she’s never coming back, he can finally breathe again.

A couple of minutes later there's a knock at the door. "Mike?" His mom calls.

"Yeah?"

"The boys are here!"

The door opens and in spill Lucas, Dustin, and Will. Mike's face splits into a grin, and he hastily takes off his blazer and tie, before he gets up to greet them.

"We figured you could use the company," Will says to him, and Lucas and Dustin nod in agreement.

Mike smiles at them. "Thank you,"

They all sit around the table, and continue their game of Dungeons and Dragons, and for the first time since Will disappeared, everything goes back to normal.

It begins to hurt less after that night, the pain of loosing her. Eggos have still lost their flavour, and he still keeps her fort up, but it hurts less, and he thinks about her less too. He still thinks about her everyday, but to gets less and less with each day. At Christmas he replaces the Snow Ball Eggos that he'd left in her fort with a new box, even though he knows she's not coming back.

The days blend into each other and 1983 changes into 1984, and winter melts into spring, and it almost feels like everything that happened last fall isn't real, and just reserved for his nightmares. The buzz about Will dies down too, and soon everyone is treating him like they used to, except James and Troy, they have stayed well away from the boys since the quarry incident. The boys begin to worry about normal pre-teen things again, they are finally settled. With the weather finally getting better, they spend even more time outside, biking around, exploring, like they do most springs, though they are careful not to go too far, for obvious reasons.

His birthday comes and goes, and he wonders what it would be like if Eleven was here. Would she get him anything?

Eggos, probably, he thinks, and he laughs quietly, surprising himself. It feels strange to laugh about her.

Spring changes swiftly into summer, and now the boys are always outside, having fun, and Mike finds the pain of Eleven hurting even less. It's been six months since her death; that feels so long for a thirteen year old.

They stick to their usual summer rituals, water gun fights; biking down to the river just out of town; pulling pranks on the older siblings; eating s'mores around a camp fire at night; taking advantage of the fact that they're no school nights and playing extensively long games of Dungeons & Dragons on the hotter days.

There's only one thing different this summer: Girls.

It is almost as if both Lucas and Dustin realised that girls weren't gross right after they turned thirteen. Mike and Will both remain wary though, Mike for one reason; Will for another. Sure, Mike *likes* girls, but every time he thinks about one, they just morph into El in his head. Her small smile, her shaved head, her deep brown eyes that held so much pain and kindness at the same time.

He is standing with Will, the two are watching Lucas, from a distance, and his poor attempt to talk to Sally Harding, a very pretty girl from school.

"Do you miss her?" Will asks Mike suddenly.

Mike snaps around, taken by surprise. "Wh-what?"

"Eleven,"

Mike feels that familiar pain his gut, fainter than it was, but still there; he doesn't think it will ever completely go away. "Yeah," he murmurs, after a moment, "everyday."

And it *is* true, he *does* miss her everyday, even if he doesn't feel it till four in the afternoon, he always has a moment where his gut hurts and his heart sinks.

Will smiles sadly, "I wish I could've met her."

“She saw you, in the Upside-Down,”

“I know, but I didn’t know she was there,”

Mike nods thoughtfully, looking away from Will and over at Lucas. “You would’ve liked her. She would’ve liked you too.”

Will watches Mike curiously for a few moments before looking over at Sally and Lucas too. “Oh god,” Will laughs, “What is he doing? Is he- is he shaking her hand?!”

They both burst out laughing, and Lucas glares over in their direction.

Despite the strange timelessness that is summer, it comes to an end and the boys start school again. Summer fades into autumn and before they know it, it’s been a year since Will disappeared, and a year since they met El.

It’s November 7th and he’s looking at her fort, it’s been gathering dust for a while now, he barely sits in it anymore. Mike can hardly comprehend that he set it up a year ago. That they found El a year ago.

What is ‘friend’?

A friend is someone you would do anything for.

He shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath before opening them again, and walking up the stairs and away from the fort.

It is a couple of days later, and they are all in Mike’s basement.

“Something weird is going on guys,” Will tells them.

“What do you mean ‘weird’?” Dustin asks him.

“Like weird weird, like last year weird. I heard Hopper talking to

Mom, it sounds really bad.” Will says seriously.

“Oh shit, like Demogorgon?” Dustin asks.

“El killed the Demogorgon!” Lucas points out before Will can reply.

Nobody speaks, but they are all thinking the same thing, just waiting for one of them to voice it. It’s Dustin who finally does, “What if there was more than one?”

Mike gulps, and all four of them exchange worried glances.

Mike turns to Will. “Did you ever see more than one in the Upside-Down?”

Will shakes his head. “I only saw one, but...”

“But what, Will?” Dustin asks loudly, sounding scared.

“But I only saw one, but if the Upside-Down is as big as our world then there’s bound to be more. Maybe Hawkins has the only gate and now...”

“Now they’re all coming here to the gate,” Mike finishes for him.

“Oh shit! Oh shit, shit, shit!” Dustin exclaims loudly.

“Calm down, Dustin!” Lucas says, whacking him.

“Calm down?! Do you remember what that thing *looked* like, what it could *do*?! We are so screwed without El!”

The truth settles around them, the completely obvious truth. They *are* so screwed without El.

“Well, we don’t need to get involved,” Mike says to the group, “we have no reason too, no one’s missing. We just need to stay away from anything that could have to do with the Demogorgon.”

Lucas and Will murmur their agreement.

“What about Eleven?” Dustin points out, loudly and insensitively.

“Eleven’s dead!” Mike says forcibly, the words coming out a bit louder and angrier than he had meant.

“We don’t know that, Mike! She just disappeared!” Dustin argues.

“Stop, Dustin! Stop! You guys were the ones who said she was dead!”

“Yeah, well, now I’m not so sure,” Dustin responds, somehow managing to be calm.

Mike glares at him, and can feel a lump rising in his throat and tears sparking in his eyes. It’s been so long since he’s cried about El.

Lucas whacks Dustin. “Dude, stop it,” he mutters.

“What?” Dustin asks, gesturing with his hands.

“Can’t you see it’s making him upset,”

“I’m *not* upset!” Mike says too loudly as a tear rolls down his cheek.

“Mike, it’s fine if you are, you have every right to be,” Lucas says quietly.

“I’m not!” He stands up and wipes his eyes defiantly.

“Mike,” Will says gently, tugging on his sleeve.

“Mike, I’m sorry,” Dustin says sincerely, “I didn’t mean to make you upset, I’m sorry.”

Mike sits down and takes a deep breath, wiping his eyes once more. “I’m fine,” he tells them.

They don’t look so sure.

“I’m fine.” He repeats, firmer this time, more believable. “Eleven’s dead, Dustin, and I just... don’t think it’s good to try and think otherwise.”

Dustin nods. “Yeah, I get that,”

The boys sit in silence for a while.

"So we just *avoid* the Demogorgon and the gate?" Lucas asks, breaking the silence. "That's our plan?"

The boys glance each other and nod. "That's our plan."

That night Mike tries to put Dustin's words out of his mind.

What about Eleven?

She just disappeared.

Now I'm not so sure.

He sits up, his breathing quick and shallow.

What if he's right?

What if she's still alive.

He lies back down and tries to calm his breathing.

If she is alive, and I believed she was dead all these months, does that make me a horrible person for not believing?

Stay in the basement and under no circumstances go outside.

Those had been Hopper's exact words. It is ten minutes later and the boys are huddled in Mike's basement, where Hopper had dropped them all off.

"I told you something bad was happening," Will had said when Hopper told them to stay.

"What do you think is going on?" Dustin asks the group.

"Something real bad," Lucas responds.

"Demogorgon," Will nods.

"Bad Men," Mike adds.

“The energy department ones?” Lucas asks.

Mike nods and Dustin says, “It’s gotta be, why else would we be in danger?”

They hear the unmistakable sound of the front door being opened, and all four boys jump, their hearts racing.

“Shit shit shit shitshitshitshit,” Dustin is muttering.

“Shhhh!” The other three hiss at him.

They hear the sound of large feet, and their eyes grow wide in fear.

“Maybe it’s Hopper?” Will mouths to the boys hopefully.

Mike points to a window. “If it comes near the basement door, we need to crawl through that,” he breathes.

“But Hopper said not to go outside!” Lucas hisses.

“Well if there is a bloody monster in the house then I am sure we can go outside!” Mike hisses back.

Lucas opens his mouth to retort, but they hear the floor creak loudly above them, and all immediately tense up again.

“Boys!” Comes Hopper’s voice. “It’s me!”

Dustin is about to respond when Lucas whacks him. “How do we know he’s alone?” He whispers. “Why doesn’t he come down?”

The boys stay silent, waiting for some proof that it’s just Hopper.

The basement door is thrown open and they all gasp and rush towards the back wall and window instinctively.

Hopper is standing at the top of the stairs. “Relax boys,” he says, “it really is just me.”

They all breathe a sigh of relief, their shoulders sagging.

“Come on up,” Hopper says, “there’s someone here who wants to see

you,” he motions for them to come, and exchanging looks, they charge up the stairs.

“Who is it?” Will asks.

“This way,” Hopper says, and he walks around the corner, and standing there, by the front door is Eleven.

Their faces all break into a smile, none more-so than Mike’s. His heart is racing for a completely different reason than it was down in the basement, and he feels as if he is dreaming. He rushes forward and embraces her; the two clutch each other so tightly.

“I missed you, Mike,” Eleven whispers into his ear, “so much.”

“I missed you too, El! I missed you so much,”

They can feel the other crying softly onto their shoulder, but they don’t care, and they don’t care four other people watching. They keep ahold of each other tightly, their heads on each other shoulders, eyes shut tight, tears just escaping, they can feel each other’s warm breath, and they don’t want to let go because this is the hug both of them have dreamed of for a year.

When they finally let go, Mike clutches her hands, and Eleven squeezes his reassuringly.

She’s here, she’s really here. She’s alive. She’s beautiful.

“Let’s never let that happen again, El,” he whispers to her, looking into her eyes.

She nods and smiles, her eyes sparkling with tears. “Promise?”

“Promise.” He replies softly, his heart bursting with pure happiness

Promise.